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ABSTRACT

Preservice teachers in special education at Eastern Illinois University take two concurrent courses--one teaching instructional techniques for individuals labeled mildly exceptional and the other a practicum experience in a local rural school. A study examined the preservice teachers' perceptions of what they learned working with special needs students and how they felt about their preparation for the practicum experience. Pre- and post-surveys completed by 36 preservice teachers indicated that the majority of those who completed their practicum at an elementary school felt that they were comfortable teaching math, reading, spelling, and phonics; that they were able to collaborate effectively with their preservice teachers, their cooperating teacher, and their practicum supervisor; and that carrying out an effective behavior management plan would increase their teaching effectiveness. They were divided as to whether giving more leeway to students benefitted them as "new" teachers. Those whose practicum was at a middle school were divided as to whether they felt competent to effectively teach mathematics and reading. The majority felt that they had collaborated effectively with their cooperating teacher, preservice teacher peers, and their practicum supervisor. Among those preservice teachers whose practicum was at a high school, a very small minority felt competent teaching mathematics. A majority felt that they effectively taught spelling and implemented a behavior management plan, and were successful in team-teaching. Five strategies used to incorporate students' life experiences into the curriculum are discussed. (TD)

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SELF-PERCEPTIONS OF RURAL COLLEGE SPECIAL EDUCATION PRESERVICE TEACHERS: ASSESSING THE APPLICATION OF CURRICULUM CONTENT KNOWLEDGE TO THE ACTUAL CLASSROOM.

Eastern Illinois University, founded in 1895 is a state assisted multi-purpose institution that has a population of approximately ten thousand undergraduate students. This institution focuses mainly on educating these students in the area of teacher preparation while also assisting other undergraduates pursue degreesin the arts, sciences, and the professions.

Eastern Illinois University's department of special education is housed in the College of Education and Professional Studies and offers four-year degree programs in both early childhood and standard special education (i.e., K-12). Students who graduate from the latter program will receive a LBSI or learning behavior specialist one licensure which will allow them to teach in special education classrooms and work with: (a) students, K-12 having mild to severe disabilities, (b) students having mild/moderate disabilities (i.e., regular education initiative or inclusion) and (c) students having moderate (i.e., self-contained classroom) or severe (i.e., self-contained classroom).

This research study will address the self-perceptions of thirty-six Eastern Illinois preservice special education majors who are concurrently enrolled in SPE 4900: *Instructional Strategies for Individuals Labeled Mildly Exceptional* and SPE 4901: *Practicum with Individuals Labeled Mildly Exceptional*. SPE 4900 is a five credit hour course and is taught by an Eastern Illinois University Professor over a fifteen-week semester. It focuses on curriculum theory and instructional techniques for teaching students with mild/moderate disabilities. SPE 4901 is a four-hour course and is supervised by three Eastern Illinois University practicum supervisors over a twelve-week period. It focuses on the implementation of the SPE 4900 curriculum strategies into the SPE 4901 special education classroom (i.e., self-contained, resource room, and regular education initiative) practicum experience at the elementary, middle school, and high school grade level.

The department of special education at Eastern Illinois University has Eastern Illinois University students take the SPE 4901 practicum concurrently with the SPE 4900 methods class. Their reason for grouping these two classes together is as follows. It is the department's wish to teach the theory of learning styles along with effective curriculum instruction and then allow the Eastern Illinois University student to apply what she/he as learned in the SPE 4900 methods class to an actual classroom practicum experience (i.e., SPE 4901).

SPE 4901/SPE 4900

Two concurrent special education courses must be taking by Eastern Illinois University preservice teachers prior to being accepted into student teaching. These two special education course which must be taken during a student junior's second semester or a senior's first semester are as follows. SPE 4901- Practicum with Individuals Labeled Mildly Exceptional and SPE 4900- Instructional Strategies for Individuals Labeled Mildly Exceptional. *The primary learning model for both SPE 4901 and SPE 4900 is the ecological model. In addition, the unit theme for both classes is: The educator as the creator of effective education environments.*

- Knowledge of Diverse students.
- Knowledge of Diverse Societies/Communities.

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- Knowledge of Diverse Subject Areas and Levels.
- Knowledge of Diverse Strategies.

SPE 4901

SPE 4901-Practicum with Individuals Labeled Mildly Exceptional is a four-credit hour class. SPE 4901 is also a twelve-week supervised field experience that takes place in an elementary school, a middle school, or a high school. The purpose of this practicum is to train students to collaborate with their respective teacher and her/his staff, to create instructional materials for, and teach lessons to students with mild/moderate disabilities, and demonstrate best teaching practices as well as a high level of preservice teacher professionalism

SPE 4901 PRACTICUM SUPERVISORS

The goal of a supervisor is to assist preservice teachers in developing and fine- tuning their instructional skills through "best-teaching" classroom practices that are based upon curriculum theory and research, allowing for the use of hands-on learning and curriculum adaptations that address the learning style/culture of the student be instructed (Friedus, 2002).

SPE 4901: ELEMANTARY PLACEMENT- JEFFERSON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

The practicum supervisor places nine Eastern Illinois University preservice teachers to complete their practicum experience at Jefferson Elementary School. The practicum supervisor meets with his students on Monday through Thursday from 7:50-8:00 am. The preservice teachers then work in their respective classroom from 8:00–10:15 am. The Eastern Illinois University preservice teachers are randomly assigned to one of the practicum classroom settings: (a) regular education initiative, (b) resource room, and (c) self-contained classroom.

Eastern Illinois University preservice teachers who are assigned to a REI classroom will teach daily oral language, reading, and English. In this classroom, approximately four of the twenty-three fourth grade students have a mild disability. The preservice teacher must teach an instructional lesson to the whole class and also individualize instruction and curriculum materials for the two of the four students (i.e., with mild disabilities) they are assigned to work with.

The Eastern Illinois University preservice teachers assigned to a resource room teach daily oral language, reading, English, and spelling. An instructional period is set aside for tutoring homeroom students who come from the 4th grade general education classroom. Multi-sensory instruction (i.e., using sentence strips, flashcards, or allowing students to work at the chalkboard) is encouraged in this classroom setting.

The Eastern Illinois University preservice teachers assigned to the self-contained classroom teach math, reading, and functional spelling and/or sight words. The preservice teachers incorporate both academic and life-skill instructional approaches to a small group of students in this classroom setting. Lastly, preservice teachers are encouraged by their cooperating teacher to sometimes attend class field trips out in the community.

SPE 4901: MIDDLE SCHOOL PLACEMENT: CHARLESTON MIDDLE SCHOOL

The practicum supervisor places fifteen Eastern Illinois University preservice teachers at Charleston Middle School. She tries to match up the preservice teachers with their talents to the personalities of each cooperating teacher and the middle school student needs. The middle school has students who are in the 7-8th grade.

The practicum supervisor meets with the Eastern Illinois University preservice teachers as a group on a daily basis (i.e., Monday through Thursday) from 8:15-8:30 am in the library to go over expected assignment requirements and any teaching needs or concerns. The cooperating teacher works with their assigned Eastern Illinois University preservice teacher from 8:30-10:30am.

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The Charleston Middle School setting has five classrooms in which the Eastern Illinois preservice teachers are placed. Two are self-contained (i.e., mild/moderate) and the other three are resource rooms (i.e., mild). The preservice teachers work with students (i.e., moderate) on spelling, math, and writing skills for the two periods. The preservice teachers instruct students (i.e., mild) in he resource room on science, social studies, and writing skills. The second period of the day, they work on Math or reading comprehension/writing skills. In two of the resource rooms, the Eastern Illinois University preservice teachers get to team-teach for at least two out of the four days of their placement. This means that one practicum student teaches through the lesson objective, anticipatory set, overview, rationale, and input components of the lesson plan. The other practicum student does the check for understanding, guided and independent practice with feedback and reinforcements/correctives followed by closure.

SPE 4901: HIGH SCHOOL PLACEMENT: CHARLESTON HIGH SCHOOL

The practicum supervisor places twelve Eastern Illinois University preservice teachers at Charleston High School. The practicum supervisor meets with the majority of his preservice teachers Monday through Thursday from 8:00-8:20 am (i.e., preservice teachers who are assigned to a reading program begin their practicum placement at 7:50 am. The majority of preservice teachers work with high school students in their respective placement from 8:10-10:15 am.

The majority or two-thirds of the preservice teachers are working in regular education initiative rooms. This is a parallel program for students with mild disabilities and mild mental retardation. The general education curriculum is followed but the material is presented at a lower reading level through the use of textbooks written at a lower reading level (i.e., grades 3-4). The number of high school students in these classes range from five to fourteen. If a high school class has fourteen students, two Eastern Illinois University preservice teachers will team-teach that class.

One-third of the Eastern Illinois University preservice teachers are placed in the EIU reading program is geared toward meeting the reading and English needs of students that read at the sixth grade level or below. Students in the EIU reading program are instructed by the Eastern Illinois University preservice teachers in small groups. These groups usually contain 3-4 students. English and writing skills are taught in the context of reading high interest/low vocabulary books written at the appropriate reading level. The Eastern Illinois University preservice teachers meet with these students Monday through Thursday and then supply them with independent work to be completed on Friday under the supervision of a practicing teacher. The goal of this program is to assist students in successfully reading high interest novels to enhance the enjoyment of reading while building student skills in reading and writing.

SPE 4900.

SPE 4900- Instructional Strategies for Individuals Labeled Mildly Exceptional is a five credit hour class. SPE 4900 is an introduction to methods and techniques of teaching students with mild/moderate handicapping conditions. Curriculum implementation, behavioral strategies, and classroom organization serve as the framework for course instruction.

SPE 4900 Methods Instructor

The Eastern Illinois University Special Education Professor who teaches SPE 4900-Instructional strategies for Individuals Labeled Mildly Exceptional *has had over ten years of teaching experience at the college level She incorporates technology into her SPE 4900 class through class lectures done in power point and internet assignments activities. She also engages her students through class discussion, role-playing activities, group*

reflection activities and group cooperative learning exercises (Mewborn, 1999; Shavers & Joyce, 1996; Nattiv & Winitzky, & Drickey, 1991; Zeichner & Gore, 1990). Once the Eastern Illinois University preservice teachers are out in the field and assigned to their practicum classroom setting, she reinforces how her curriculum content can be applied in their actual classroom settings.

Results from this study will allow Eastern Illinois students to explore effective models of curriculum instruction that they have implemented when working with young learners with special needs in a rural educational setting. This research study is to address the following concerns

1. Ascertain the Eastern Illinois University special education preservice teachers perceptions with regard to their feelings of classroom (SPE 4900) preparation for their practicum (SPE 4901) experience.

2. *Determine what this unique practicum experience taught the Eastern Illinois University special education preservice teachers about teaching and working with children with special needs from various grade levels and a continuum of special education classroom placements in a rural educational setting.*

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A pre-test and post-test survey (i.e., incorporated the use of a 5 point Likert scale) was developed by the researcher to ascertain what challenges thirty-six Eastern Illinois University preservice teachers felt they would have to face in their particular special education/regular education initiative classroom setting.

Prior to administering the survey, objectives were written that corresponded the categories for each survey section. The initial survey was reviewed by two other special education faculty members as well as a faculty member from the department of psychology who is an expert in the field of survey research. This survey was then revised to reflect the comments of the three reviewers. The final version of the pre-test survey consisted of the following domains: (a) preservice teacher preparation, (b) use of curriculum/lesson planning/materials at practicum setting, (c) collaboration with cooperating teacher/practicum supervisor, (d) effective use of behavior management, (e) preservice teacher information, (f) behavior management, and (g) preservice teacher expectations for learning at their practicum setting.

A post-test survey was administered to all thirty-six Eastern Illinois preservice teachers at the completion of their SPE 4901/SPE 4900 experience. The post-test survey differs mainly in the following manner. Question twenty-five ask the preservice teachers about their experiences working in a rural educational setting and how (i.e., if any) they addressed the academic or social needs of their students based upon this "cultural" difference. Because the preservice teacher sample size (n=36) was small, frequency counts were use in the analysis of survey date to derive common themes for each of the elementary, middle school, and high school placements. Actual tables incorporating percentages and/or frequencies concerning student demographics and student perceptions of their practicum experience will be presented at a later time.

SURVEY THEMES

SPE 4901 Practicum Survey Pre-Test: Jefferson Elementary School

The majority of Eastern Illinois University preservice teachers were in "agreement" that they felt comfortable in teaching in the content areas of math, reading, spelling, and phonics. While a small minority of preservice teachers were still "undecided" at thispoint in time. The preservice teachers were somewhat divided in their ability to teach in the areas of science and history. The major of preservice teachers were in "strong agreement" that they would effectively collaborate with through their preservice teacher peers, their cooperating teacher, and their practicum supervisor. The majority of preservice teachers were in "agreement" that effectively carrying out a behavior management plan would increase their "teaching" effectiveness at their practicum setting. The preservice teachers seemed to be somewhat divided in their feelings concerning whether, as a "new" teacher, they should allow more leeway with negative consequences.

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THEMES: TEACHING IN A RURAL EDUCATIONAL SETTING

Some of the strategies that the Eastern Illinois University preservice teachers used to incorporate their student's life experience were to: (a) discuss the events within Charleston, Illinois to better explain curriculum concepts, (b) discuss the political system in the State of Illinois, (c) discuss Midwest economy in relation to farming, (d) allow the students to interject their own personal experience such as "horseback riding", "cattle ranching" or "feeding chickens" (e) discuss events that were taking place in the community.

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SPE 4901 Practicum Survey Post-Test: Jefferson Elementary School

The majority of Eastern Illinois University preservice teachers maintained their level of "agreement" concerning their comfort level in teaching math, reading, spelling, and phonics. About one-half of the preservice teachers did not teach math. So, their actual comfort level with this subject could not be determined. The majority of preservice teachers were in "agreement" that they were able to collaborate effectively with their preservice teachers, their cooperating teacher, and their practicum supervisor. The majority of preservice teachers were in "strong agreement" that carrying out an effective behavior management plan would increase their teaching effectiveness. The preservice teachers will still divided as to whether giving more leeway to students would benefit them as a "new" teacher in their practicum setting.

SPE 4901 Practicum Survey Pre-Test: Charleston Middle School

The majority of Eastern Illinois preservice teachers were equally divided between "agree", "undecided" and "disagree" as to whether they felt competent to effectively teach students in the areas of math, reading, and phonics. The majority of preservice teachers were in "agreement" that they felt comfortable to instruct "spelling" but were undecided" as to whether they could effectively teach in the area of science. The preservice teachers were also equally divided as to whether they could effectively teach history.

The majority of preservice teachers were in "strong" agreement that they would be able to effectively collaborate with their cooperating teacher, their preservie teacher peers, and their practicum supervisors. The majority of preservice teachers also "agreed" that they would be able to effectively team-teach with another preservice teacher.

SPE 4901 Practicum Survey Post-Test: Charleston Middle School

The Eastern Illinois preservice teachers were equally divided in their level of comfort with regard to teaching mathematics and reading. There was an almost equal split in terms of their "agreement" and "disagreement" responses once having taught these subjects. The majority of preservice teachers agreed that they had depended on collaborating effectively with their cooperating teacher, preservice teacher peers, and their practicum supervisor. While their feelings concerning team teaming were generally in agreement, a few more students were either "undecided" or "disagreed".

SPE 4901 Practicum Survey Pre-test: Charleston High School

A minority of Eastern Illinois University preservice teachers were equally split (i.e., been "agree" and "undecided") as to whether they would feel competent instructing math. The majority of preservice teachers were in "agreement" that they would be effective instructing students in the areas of reading and spelling. Preservice teachers were split (i.e., with the majority of given responses being "undecided") with regard to their ability to effectively teach phonics. The majority of preservice teachers were equally split (i.e., across response scales) as to whether they could effectively instruct both science and history. The majority of preservice teachers were in "agreement" that they would be effective in a team-teaching situation with another peer. Likewise, the majority of preservice teachers felt that they would be able to carry out an effective behavior management plan in their practicum setting.

SPE 4901 Practicum Survey Post-Test: Charleston High School

A very small minority of Eastern Illinois University preservice teachers felt in "strongly agreement" or in "agreement" that they were effective in their instruction of math. For the majority of preservice teachers, math was not a content subject area that was taught to these Charleston High School students. A majority of preservice teachers felt in "agreement" that they were effective teaching spelling to their students. The major of preservice teachers did not get a chance to teach either Science or Social Studies. The majority of preservice teachers were in "strong agreement" that they were successful in their team-teaching experience at this high school. The majority of preservice teachers also were in "strong agreement" that they were able to effectively implement and carry out a behavior management that was consistent in its rules and consequences for the high school students.

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